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Gricean Quantity Maxim in Shashi Deshpande's "The Binding Vine"



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A B S T R A C T

Conversation is governed by norms or principles. These principles in human verbal interaction are diverse. They control and guide human verbal talk. One of such norms is the Quantity Maxim proposed by a philosopher H.P. Grice (1975). This maxim states that communicators should give required quantity of information while conversing with their conversational partner. They should give neither more nor less information than required by the partner. One observes that when a partner gives more or less information than required by the other, this maxim is violated. This violation leads to generate unstated meanings called 'implicature' and 'social implication' about the speaker. Deviation from this Quantity maxim, thus, conveys social, religious, political and personal information about the speaker and also hints at his communicative intention. This article applies this maxim to character-to-character level interaction in Shashi Deshpande's "The Binding Vine" (1993) and discusses the deviations from this maxim by characters which help to analyse the novelistic discourse.

Grice proposes in his seminal paper "Logic and Conversation" (1975) that conversation is a cooperative endeavour between speaker and listener. They cooperate each other by observing the four maxims of conversational Cooperative Principle. These maxims are—Quantity Maxim, Quality Maxim, Relation Maxim and Manner Maxim. Grice (1975: 45-46) defines the four maxims as follows:

1. The Maxim of Quantity:
 - > Make your contribution as informative as required.
 - > Do not make your contribution more informative than required.
2. The Maxim of Quality:
 - > Do not say that which you believe to be false.
 - > Do not say that for which you lack adequate evidence.
3. The Maxim of Relation:
 - > Be relevant.
4. The Maxim of Manner:
 - > Avoid obscurity of expression.
 - > Avoid ambiguity.
 - > Be brief (avoid unnecessary prolixity).
 - > Be orderly.

The following conversation from R. K. Narayan's "The Bachelor of Arts" (1965) takes place in a typical Gricean fashion:

He asked, "Mother, do you like the girl?"

- "Yes, she is good-looking".
- "Does she talk all right?"
- "She talks quite well".
- "What class is she reading in, mother?"
- "Sixth form".
- "Is she a good student?"
- "Her mother says that she is very good in the class". (P.162)

The partners in this conversation are the hero in the novel-Chandran and his mother. Chandran asks his mother about Susila-a girl he wants to marry. His mother provides him required information. Her contributions are truthful. She makes relevant remarks in clear and brief manner. The conversation, thus, follows the four maxims of Cooperative Principle proposed by H. P. Grice. One observes that the Quantity maxim is not always followed. On many an occasion there are deliberate omissions, digressions and uninformative remarks in the course of conversation. All these are the deviations from the maxim. A perusal of these deviations assists one in analyzing themes, characters and their communicative intentions. Shashi Deshpande's "The Binding Vine" centres around Urmila, Mira (her dead mother-in-law), Shakuntala, her daughter Kalpana and Shakuntala's sister Sulu. The dominant theme in the novel is human relationships that perpetuate through the vine of life—the spring of life. The characters in the novel blatantly flout this maxim on a number of occasions. This suggests how they negotiate their relationships by being over-informative and under-informative. The analysis of such conversational pieces assists one to unearth a lot of socio-cultural and personal information.

The following talk takes place between Urmila's sister-in-law Vanaa and Shakuntala (Shakutai) in a hospital ward:

- (1) "Isn't there anyone who can be with you? How many children do you have?"

"Three. Kalpana is the eldest". (P.59)

The preceding contest of the novel tells us that Vanaa is Urmila's sister-in-law working as a nurse in a hospital. Vanaa and the doctor are treating Shakutai's daughter Kalpana—a rape victim. When Shakutai visits the ward, Vanaa asks her if there is not anyone to escort

her to her home and how many children she has. Shakutai withholds the answer to the first question. For the second question-'How many children do you have'" "Three" would have been the required reply. But Shakutai adds that of the three children Kalpana is the eldest. Shakutai flouts the Quantity maxim by being over-informative by saying- 'Kalpana is the eldest'. We know that the eldest unmarried daughter being raped has a truckload of implications in the patriarchal Indian social set up. The eldest unmarried daughter being raped entails the ruin of the family's name and impairing of marriage prospects of not only Kalpana but also Shakutai's younger daughter Sandhya. Telling Vanaa that "Kalpana is the eldest' at a deeper level implicates "Kalpana's plea to Vanaa and the doctor not to divulge what has happened to Kalpana". An apparently small utterance 'Kalpana is the eldest' expresses Shakutai's agony, fear and helplessness. From this we get a glimpse of "Shakutai's traumatic state" (Sharma 2005: 48).

In another instance Urmila flouts the maxim by giving more information than required by Bhaskar-a doctor. This happens as follows:

(2)"You are alone?" he asks.

"Yes, my mother and Kartik have gone with Vanaa and Harish. I had work, corrections piled up".

"Hmm. Your father?" he asks bending down to look at Papa's photograph, hands behind his back.

"Yes. He died four years back". (P.85)

While returning from the sea-shore Urmila happens to encounter Bhaskar Jain-the doctor. He drops Urmila her home in his car. Urmila is willing to get rid of him. When Bhaskar looks at her expectantly, she is forced to invite him in. No sooner does he sit down than he asks Urmila if she is alone at her home today. The plain "Yes" was enough for his question. But she informs unsolicitedly that her mother Inni and her son Kartik have gone out with her husband Harish and Vanaa. This is a deliberate gesture on her part. Her over-informativeness implicates that "I am alone and even my son Kartik is also out, go on and say what you want to say". This impudicacy is calculated by Bhaskar. What follows in their conversation after this exchange are the two delicate issues: marriage and Kalpana being raped. When a speaker does not want to hurt the other party or put another person in danger, he refuses to relay the required information. Sometimes he deviates from the Quantity maxim for legal or ethical reason. He is said to opt out of the maxim. The protagonist Urmila does this in the following talk:

(3) "Sometimes, Urmila I think I was cruel to the girl, but I did it for her. I wanted her to have all that I never had-education, a good life, a good marriage, respect from others. Look at me. What am I? I don't want my

children to be like me". And then the cry breaks out of her. "Did I do wrong, Urmila, was I cruel to her?" And again "I did not want to be born, is that why she is dying now. Is this my punishment?"

I listen to her with a strange feeling. (P. 112)

When Kalpana is admitted into a hospital after being raped, Urmila visits the ward. She brings Shakuntala back her home. Urmila engages in making tea. Shakuntala bursts out her fear, pain and helplessness to Urmila. She relates how her sister Sulu has been kind enough to bring up not only Kalpana but also her son Prakash and her younger daughter Sandhya. She explains how motherly she has been towards Kalpana. She questions Urmila whether it is her fault that she has been cruel to Kalpana after being raped and that this is the punishment meted out to her. Urmila looks at Shakuntala's gestures-her bones pushing against the dry skin, the deathly stillness about the body and her face like a rigid mask. Urmila only listens to Shakuntala and does not respond to her questioning and revelations. By keeping mum Urmila opts out of the Quantity maxim. It hints at her intention to commiserate with Shakuntala in the present context.

Sometimes a speaker deviates from the Quantity maxim as he wants to be linguistically polite to the other and to preserve his 'face'. The following is an illustration:

(4) I squeeze myself out of the place and am waiting for the lift when Priti comes running to me.

"Urmil, you are going. What is it?"

"Sorry, Priti. I should have told you. I have to go. A friend of mine-her sister is dead".

"Oh, no! I'm sorry".

"I'm sorry, too. I'm going away like this".

"Don't be silly. This is not important. Would you like me to drop you home?"

"No, I'll get a taxi".

"Keep in touch then". (P.187)

Casual though it appears, this is a beautiful example of how people negotiate and encode their relationship through verbal interaction. The narrator-protagonist Urmila attends the party organized to celebrate the success of Priti's film "Sati". As the party is in progress, a call from her mother Inni, has a soul-shattering news for Urmila that Sulu-Shakutai's sister and Kalpana's aunt-has died. Shakutai wants to see Urmila. Priti approaches Urmila and asks why she is leaving the party abruptly. Urmila withholds to answer Priti's question, avoiding to relate who her friend is and who has died. Urmila's move to withhold the information she possesses is directed to make Priti feel easy. A speaker withholds the information which he possesses "When the element of the discourse targeted

is always the most scandalous" (Besnier 1989: 330). This is the moment of happiness in Priti's life and as such no time for telling Priti who Sulu is and who Shakutai and Kalpana are. One learns that the maxim of Quantity has a back seat when it comes to promote comity rather than conflict in social relationships-the function of Politeness Principle. "Considerations of politeness may inhibit the speaker. This is one of the most crucial aspects of Grice's theory for the interpretation of literary texts" (Black 2006: 25).

Conclusion:

The maxim of Quantity in Gricean Pragmatics dictates the language users to be as informative as required by conversational partner. But observation and experience tell us that the practical considerations of life and the conversational goal compel us to deviate from the norm. When deviation from the maxim is deliberate and flagrant, it is a flout of the maxim. A maxim is flouted to generate implicature. Implicature is "The force associated with the recognition (by the

listener) of the intention (speaker's) to communicate" (Forrester 1996: 51). In the present analysis Shakutai's flout of the maxim generates the implicature-'Shakutai's plea to Vanaa and the doctor not to divulge what has happened to Kalpana'. When Urmila withholds to answer Priti's question, her intention is to be polite to Priti. In pragmatic terminology Urmila opts out of the Quantity maxim to follow a rule of being polite-"To make A feel easy-be friendly" (Lakoff 1973: 298). Urmila deviates from the Quantity maxim to be considerate to Priti. This is because as language users "We conserve our integrity as interlocutors while being considerate to our partner's face" (Mey 2001: 76). Thus, used as a yardstick the Gricean Quantity maxim guides our reading and interpretation of the character-to-character level discourse in the novel. This in turn explicates and unravels the themes in the novel and the traits in the personality of characters. In a nutshell, the perusal of deviations from this maxim enriches novelistic interpretation.

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